

How should I handle a boss who flip-flops back and forth on issues?

Question: The company I work for had an office/staff restructuring about a year ago. I was hired as the office administrator. My boss is also new. He tells me that as an administrator, I should administrate. When I do, he doesn't back me up and inevitably he goes in the opposite direction and has me jump through hoops only to end up right back where I started.

I'll say, "the sky is blue." He'll say, "No ... the sky is green, and why don't you study up on the green sky and get back to me on why it is green." Then he'll come back a week later and say "the sky is blue" and a week later ask me how the "green sky" is going.

How should I tactfully and professionally tell him I'm frustrated and it affects the way I get things done? I am very confident in how I do my job, but to be honest, there are times when I'll question if the sky really is green.

— Paula

Comments

Document. Document. Document. Try to do as much communicating with him via e-mail so you have everything in writing. You can use that to bring back to him and say, "Well, originally you said" It's called CYA (cover your a..)

Posted by: Janet | October 12, 2007 at 04:08 PM

I hate to tell you this but my guess is that whatever issues you have with him, he either a) believes that the problems are all yours or b) will do what he can to convince you that the problems are all yours or c) all the above. I also believe that he will drive you crazy as long as you work for him. It will be a roller coaster ride of insanity. I agree with Janet, cya. He will make you his scapegoat if you let him. Keep your eyes open for other opportunities as well. I know you just got this job but trust me, it will only get worse if you keep working for him.

Posted by: | October 12, 2007 at 04:21 PM

Ditto to both comments already posted. You didn't mention if your boss was also young (as in inexperienced). Sometimes a new manager really doesn't know how to manage people. I've worked for people like this and I agree you need to document everything and look for another position. This guy will never change.

Posted by: AnitaC | October 12, 2007 at 04:24 PM

I agree, document everything.

When I think clarification or direction may be an issue, I follow-up to verbal interactions with an email that includes copying all people who may be involved. For instance, if I got the 'green sky' issue, I would follow-up with an email to the boss, copied to the our GIS director. The email would include date and time of conversation, my understanding of what I was expected to accomplish, my proposed timeline for completing, the information I would need from other people/divisions and a statement that indicates a deadline for response from the boss. That usually reads something like: I will proceed with this course within 24 hours of notificatio of the read receipt from your email unless clarification is received before then. Make sure you activate read receipt. Then you know they read it and that others have read it as well. This will also help you track the time you spend on useless projects which can be a valuable piece of knowledge.

Posted by: Mere | October 12, 2007 at 04:25 PM

Often a "Please wait a minute! I'm writing this down," curbs confusion in the future.

Posted by: Linda | October 12, 2007 at 04:25 PM

I agree with Janet. I was let go about 15 years ago from a job because I did not know about the importance of documenting and later when the boss began having problems with the powers above I was blamed for the problems. However, six months after I was let go the new owners called and wanted me to come back to work for them, it seems after I was gone they saw where the real problem existed. I have learned,since that time to document everything through emails and by Memo's plus I keep a journal.

Posted by: | October 12, 2007 at 04:30 PM

How about "I realize that you believe the sky is green, however, I know for a fact that it's blue and would be happy to discuss this further with you when you have a moment."
As for changing things up and sending mixed messages, how about "Oh, it's green this week? Last week, you said it's blue. Would you like me to send a memo to the staff about the change you've made?"
Give it a whirl, girl! Putting him on the spot just may get you off of one!

Posted by: Kimberly | October 12, 2007 at 04:39 PM

I'm going to jump on the documentation bandwagon here. I've had many bosses who flip-flop, and it is usually because they have so much going on at once that they can't keep track of what they said. I learned many years ago to write everything down. That way, all I have to do is say, "Oh, I must be confused. Let me check my notes. Hmm, no it says right here 'green sky'. Have you decided to go a different direction?" Most of the time now, all I have to do is reach for my notepad, and the boss says, "I guess I did say green." It helps him, too, because he knows that if he forgot something, I have it written down.

Posted by: Lisa | October 12, 2007 at 04:59 PM

I worked for an executive just like yours! And anonymous is correct, somehow the problems always ended up being my fault. Because he was a top executive that was with the company from the beginning, no

documentation could have protected me. He also talked about how it "wasn't working out" and was trying to fire me. For this personality type, Kimberly hit a good point. They respect being confronted professionally and most importantly they WANT to be managed and want to be told what color the sky is today, although you may have to explain why. Getting into discussions with this personality type can work if the talk is very brief and focused on solutions that YOU must present. Stand your ground but remain professional and strong. For me, the toughest part was figuring out the processes he was OK with and forcing myself to come up with alternatives for the ones he didn't like. Yes, he changed his mind along the way and would complain but it seems like it was his way of venting. Yes, I rolled my eyes a lot and would get ticked off but I also saw it as a challenge that I wasn't going to let get the best of me. He ended up resigning and four years later, I'm still here. Best to you, it may be difficult but you will find what works for your relationship, even if through mistakes.

Posted by: Anita T. | October 12, 2007 at 05:24 PM

I would suggest that in addition to documenting incidences (especially those that may negatively affect performance evaluations or may be used to make you look to be at fault), use the resources available on the internet (online libraries are wonderful) to read up on how to handle difficult people. They are full of suggestions for specific personality types. You may consider "collaborating" with another co-worker on projects (looks good for peer to peer mentoring and team building) to have someone to confirm what actually transpired should you decide to bring this to the attention of upper management, or if it should escalate to the point where your job is at jeopardy.

Is the added stress of this boss worth staying at your present job? Could you speak with management about the reporting structure? Is there an HR person you could speak with - they may be able to assist without your name ever being mentioned.

Posted by: | October 14, 2007 at 05:32 PM

This sounds like a person that wants to maintain control of everything, thus always being on the opposite side from you. I have worked around that problem by running my decisions by my boss before implementing them. That way, if they disagree, you can discuss it on the spot. If they agree, they feel like they have helped make the decision or made it themselves. Even though a boss may say they want you to administrate, some do not mean it.

Posted by: Sandy | October 15, 2007 at 10:07 AM

I agree with the documentation. It comes in handy when questions arise. However, I would ask THEM to write down what THEY want done. That way, they can't come back a week later and say YOU wrote it down wrong. I have a form that people fill out including what time they gave the project to me, when they need it by (deadline) and what they want done. That way if anything is wrong, I can show proof that I did what they asked. We track our time/printing/repro by project number also so the form has a space for this as well.

Posted by: Sarah | October 15, 2007 at 11:34 AM

I worked for a couple of those. The thing that helped me the most was writing down what was originally asked. When conflicting information came in, I would go to that boss and ask for help in deciphering what he/she meant. It took a few rounds of this, but eventually we got on the same page. Even after we were on the same

page, I still wrote everything down. Every now and then the boss (or even I) would slip.

Posted by: Diane Johnson-Hung | October 16, 2007 at 11:06 AM

I agree with the others. With people who forget what they indeed say to you, or like to push blame off themselves onto you, I keep their emails. My preferred method of communicating with these types is email or with another person. If things go down that road you can show them the email and say, you emailed me to research that green sky...

CYA is top priority with these types. Luckily they are other peoples boss and not mine. If you want to stay at your job I would test the water and have a meeting about this. Start off light, like a situation where you were right and it took them forever to figure that out. Maybe next time you just let them know, "maybe if we could sit down next time and go over the situation we may have been able to come to an agreement before I begin researching". It really does cause a "slow train" when that type is involved! Good Luck

Posted by: Jocelyn | October 19, 2007 at 01:27 PM

I worked for someone like that for WAY TOO LONG and he was a BLAMER. I spent WAY too much of my time documenting everything I did to avoid being caught in the traps he laid for me (and everyone else). What a waste of time these types are. Never again will I work for a "Mr. Dithers."

Posted by: I worked for someone like that... | October 19, 2007 at 01:50 PM

Sometimes you have to work for a "flipper", and sometimes you are not in a position to look for another job. I agree with the "documenters". Write everything down, confirm in writing or by e-mail (make sure your e-mail has provision to let you know that the "flipper" has read your e-mail), print everything out, and keep in a safe place away from the office. Periodically, put these e-mails in an envelope, take it to your local post office and mail it to yourself, so you will have a postmark. Of course, you won't open the envelope, but it's another way to have documentation that things happened when you said they did. Believe me: this is not "overkill". I was in a situation where a counseling memo could very easily have been turned into a document which could have cost me my job: my ability to open the sealed envelope in front of the company president in order to prove my case allowed me to keep my job and the "flipper" was highly embarrassed. Of course, being a boss, he could keep his job, but he left me alone after that one.

Posted by: Anon | October 22, 2007 at 06:34 PM